

On the Methodology of Greek-Australian Historiography*

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This paper addresses some of the methodological issues that are raised by efforts to write the history of the Greek-Australian communities. In general Australian historiography tends to undervalue the national significance of Greek-Australian history. We attempt firstly to outline the conditions under which we might begin to redress this weakness. To this end we identify the role that the communities play in the development of white Australian national identity throughout the twentieth century by arguing that white Australia has assigned to the migrant communities the social position of what we call the “perpetual foreigner-within”. We then proceed to sketch some of the main features of two patterns of response to this assignment that have developed within the Greek-Australian communities of the twentieth century.

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Introduction

What would it mean for us to write the history of the Greek-Australian communities as *Australian* history? Conversely, what would it mean for us to write Australian history in ways that attribute a role of national significance to the development of its southern European migrant communities? The first formulation of our question calls upon us to explain the concept of our community practices of historiography. Indeed, it has now become possible for us to raise and explore the question of the wider socio-historical significance of the organised Greek-Australian community life in so far as we have become what we might call a self-interpreting history-making community. That is, in making and recording our own community history we have made explicit our collective self-constituting dimension. This aspect of the self-determining agency of Greek-Australian communities involves reflection upon social practice with a view to producing self-knowledge.

In our view, we became the collective beneficiaries of an original and exemplary version of Greek-Australian historiography, that is, of history writing that calls into being our collective self-constituting powers, in the work of the historian Michael Tsounis. By the early 1970s Michael Tsounis had produced a volume of research that traces the formation, development and internal dynamics of the Greek-Australian communities. It is this form of reflection upon community life that makes possible and, indeed, necessary our first question: how to write Greek-Australian community history as *Australian* history. Once we are in a position to pose this question we can begin to appreciate broader frames of reference. In particular, in order to understand how the organised Greek-Australian communities have situated themselves historically in the wider Australian socio-political context, we need also to understand how and why this context has permitted their emergence. Indeed, this latter question of how and why Australian society opened itself up to this historical possibility takes precedence in our analysis. We take the view that the key to understanding the national significance of the presence of Greek migrant communities

lies in an understanding of the wider white Australian nation-building processes that have presupposed and insisted upon the denial of recognition to the Indigenous peoples of this country. In our extensive research we argue that this failure of recognition has ultimately resulted in the need for white Australia to locate a perpetual foreigner within the boundaries of the nation-state (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, in press a).¹ Let us briefly summarise our argument.

Indigenous-white relations and the perpetual foreigner-within

The continued dispossession of Indigenous peoples makes possible the claim of white Australia to ownership of the country as if Australian territory had not already belonged to other sovereign peoples. However, due to the nature of the relationship between the modern European concepts of property and subjectivity, this has given rise to a deep tension at the ontological level of our constitution as a nation. What is the essence of this relationship? On the one hand, the members of a modern western liberal order are encouraged through the legal, political and economic institutions to relate to the world as property-owning subjects for whom exchange relations function as the primary form of social interaction. On the other hand, dispossession denies this form of subjectivity to Indigenous peoples. This is a denial to Indigenous peoples of the very identity on which the collective being of white Australians has been founded and socially instituted.

How does the denial of Indigenous peoples' subjectivity affect white Australian ways of being? In order to exercise orderly possession and control of their property white Australians need to be recognised as rightful owners; but the Indigenous peoples who remain dispossessed are not in a position to supply this indispensable form of recognition. Our collective failure to give and receive this basic form of recognition gives rise to what we call an ontological disturbance. This is a disturbance of the very conditions that render coherent our being as white Australians.

¹ See also *Locating the Foreigner Within*, authors' book manuscript in progress.

Moreover, because dominant white Australia is unwilling to recognise its occupier status, it has had to invoke a suitable “other” to play the role of legitimating its authority and to alleviate the anxiety that the occupation of stolen land produces for an ontologically disturbed subjectivity. To play this dual legitimating and anxiety-relieving role certain migrant groups are positioned as the perpetual foreigners-within. These two elements — failure to recognise the subjectivity and sovereignty of Indigenous peoples and the consequent reliance on a perpetual foreigner-within — take place in socio-historical circumstances that have produced what we call “the onto-pathology of white Australian subjectivity”. At the heart of this condition is the violence that is perpetuated by a collective or national will whose constitution takes the form of criminality.

To play the legitimating and anxiety-relieving role that white Australia depends upon, the perpetual foreigner must combine two indispensable yet incompatible qualities. These are a property-owning identity and a residual racialised difference from the dominant white Australian. On the one hand, the foreigner must be positioned as a modern subject who has the potential to become fully absorbed into the social network of commodity production and circulation. On the other, the foreigner must be marked in a way that renders foreignness readily visible. The characteristic of a property-owning identity qualifies the foreigner to supply recognition whereas that of racialised difference retains him or her in the position of the anxiety-relieving “other”. For this reason the perpetual foreigner must remain “white-but-not-white-enough”. As such, the foreigner is placed within the control of Australian state authorities at the same time as being forced to remain a social outsider. Historically, this inside-outsider notion of the foreigner-within cuts across and informs official and public understandings of the legal, political, economic and social status of various (im)migrant groups irrespective of their origins, method of arrival or length of stay in Australia. Prior to official multiculturalism the dominant foreigner discourses designated southern European communities as the spaces inhabited by the foreigners-within (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, in press b).

With the official recognition of multicultural citizenship, these spaces are now more readily identified with the refugee detention centres. Indeed, there are remarkable similarities between the current dominant refugee discourses and the dominant images of the southern European foreigner of earlier times (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2002 a).

What is the picture that emerges when we situate the historical development of the Greek-Australian communities within this wider discursive framework, a framework that positions the migrant to play a legitimating and anxiety-relieving role for white Australia? We can trace two general patterns of response to this historical expectation. Firstly, beginning with the formation of the first Greek Orthodox Community (GOC) organisation in 1897 we can map various community-constituting processes in terms of their conformity with Greek migrants' foreigner positioning. A second pattern of community-constituting conduct emerges from about the 1920s when, having joined the newly formed Communist Party of Australia (CPA), a section of Greek migrants began to draw upon the ideals of socialist internationalism to advance a longstanding challenge to their foreigner positioning. Let us sketch some of the most noteworthy aspects and moments that define these two trajectories, noting from the outset that both were very much, albeit in different ways, informed by the Anglophone Australian discourses that framed their being in Australia.

Greek-Australian communities and the internalisation of a foreigner position

We can sum up the main features of the first mentioned approach to the communities' self-constituting dynamic as follows. Firstly, key elements of the institutional formation of the communities function as mechanisms for the collective internalisation of the perpetual foreigners' inside-outsider status. A prime example is the GOCs.² The GOC founders were not simply in touch with Greek migrants' need

² See our article in this collection, "Ethnicity as an Organisational Concept in the Life of the Community".

to establish the means by which to maintain their cultural heritage, engage in religious practices and pass on their language to younger generations. They must also have been acutely aware of the prevailing ideas within the wider society of their times, and their actions can be read as no less a product of these ideas. At the end of the nineteenth century when the GOC of Melbourne and Victoria was being formed, the wider Australian nation-building processes had produced the conditions whereby it had become possible to found the Commonwealth of Australia through a formalisation of the infamous *White Australia Policy*. Indigenous peoples' resistance had been sufficiently contained, as had differences between the various immigrant groups from the Anglophone nations. As a result, there was some considerable confidence in the ability of a white Australian nationalism to dominate the socio-political landscape. This was certainly the context in which the Anglophone foreigner discourses developed but it also framed a distinctive Greek community discourse of the foreigner.³

Indeed, not only conservatives within the GOCs, but the Greek press and conservative employers of Greek migrants within the catering trades consistently instituted and reinforced an image of the Greek migrant as what we have called the submissive foreigner. This image reformulated without challenging the Greek migrants' assigned foreigner position. As the submissive foreigner the Greek migrant could submit to white Australian authority with integrity in so far as he acted as a good guest (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, in press b).

But conformity to the notion of the perpetual foreigner-within went beyond the formation of community institutions that internalised the demands of the white Australian authorities. The community institutionalisation of the perpetual foreigner also created a space for the recognition of foreign bodies as legitimate representatives of foreigner communities. We can thus trace a long line of action by the Greek Church and Greek Consulate as recognised authorities over the needs, interests and lives of Greek migrants, whether or not they

³ We discuss this extensively in *From Foreigner to Citizen: Greek Migrants and Social Change in White Australia (1900–2000)*, in press c.

were naturalised British subjects. As the foreigner-within the Greek migrant must at once submit to Australian authority and be governable by another foreign power.

The historical process of actively internalising and reformulating the image of the perpetual foreigner-within implicates the GOCs, the Greek press, the Church, the Consulate and the communities' dominant employing shopkeeper classes in the implementation of an extensive disciplinary and self-policing network of relations. The ultimate ends of this network are both inwardly and outwardly directed. Outwardly, community institutions that adopted the foreigner discourses focused on representing and promoting the communities' good image — the image of the submissive foreigner — to the Australian authorities and people.

At the same time, the communities' inwardly directed self-policing mechanisms served to contain Greek migrants within their designated foreigner position. Accordingly, the Greek Consulate and Church authorities cooperated with the Australian intelligence services. They extended into the communities the forms of power over migrants' lives that the intelligence services exercised from the outside so to speak. Moreover, the processes that (re)enforced the communities' foreigner position not only determined a significant part of the institutional life of the communities, they also had ideological implications. The implementation of the communities' self-policing mechanisms contributed to a general culture of fear of authority.

Once we recognise the operation of this wider discursive framework it becomes possible to trace the basis underlying various political allegiances of otherwise opposed community institutions. So, for example, we can see that the historic Church-GOC conflicts (Tsounis, 1971) take place against the background of a shared adoption by the Church and the conservatives within the GOCs of Greek migrants' assigned role as foreigners. So too, the introduction of communist ideals in the communities was attacked by these same forces not only on the familiar grounds of conservatism, but also in the name of disassociating the community from subversive elements in order to protect

the Greek migrants' public image as submissive foreigners.

The image of the submissive foreigner dominates organised community life by the late 1930s and early 1940s. However, by the end of the 1950s a series of events, at the community, national and international levels, result in a noteworthy reduction of popular and broad-based institutional conformity with foreigner discourses within the Greek-Australian communities. The late 1950s marks the end of an important historical phase in the long-standing Church-GOCs conflict with the opening of the GOCs to more progressive forces. This period also marks a solidification of Greek-Australian political activism that was symbolised with the establishment of the newspaper *Neos Kosmos*. (We will discuss the significance of this action in the next section.)

The image of the submissive foreigner did not however disappear from community life. Instead, the significantly weakened powers of the Greek Consulate and Church became the repositories of this image until the early 1970s, when in our view it resurfaced as the unacknowledged core of official multicultural policy. In other words, the abandonment of the official White Australia Policy was politically instituted in a way that temporarily drove underground the demands generated by the white Australian onto-pathology. Foreigner communities, like the Greek-Australian communities, were indeed transformed into ethnic communities. This meant that the potential for foreigner subversiveness was no longer immediately identifiable with their very existence.

Yet, as progressive reformulations of the meaning of multicultural citizenship make clear by the 1990s, the citizens of ethnic communities are still not the full beneficiaries of white Australian privileges; we have not completely shed our foreigner positioning. We are, instead, recognised in the terms promoted by the image of the submissive foreigner that the conservatives within the communities had promoted from the outset. That is, since the 1970s the dominant Anglophone discourses have formally recognised the place of Greek-Australian identity. Yet this is achieved by invoking not only the property-owning power that grounds the mutual recognition of formal subjects but also an irreducible ethnic difference that retains us in the position of the ethnic "other".

This is why the multicultural state makes possible the full enjoyment of ethnically determined differences within the framework of a binding commitment to the white Australian ideals of formal citizenship, such as respect for liberal democracy and the rule of law (Kalantzis, 2000).

From this perspective we can read the gradual increase from the 1980s in the power of the Greek Church over the internal life of the Greek-Australian communities as an outcome of the possibilities generated by its reassigned foreigner position. Within the revised Anglophone discursive framework, organised community life can become focused on the cultivation and enjoyment of ethnic difference to such an extent that the political question of the promotion of democratic community processes has become an incidental concern. In the absence of viewing this political ideal as a constitutive element of organised Greek-Australian community life, an authoritarian Church can be just as well placed to act as a community spokesperson and address members' cultural and welfare needs as the GOCs.

Greek-Australian activism and the rejection of the communities' foreigner position

As we noted above, within the organised communities there is a second line of response to this gradual removal of the question of the fundamental nature of democratic citizenship from the political landscape of the ethnic communities in the post-multiculturalism era. Today, this response gives priority to support for Indigenous sovereignty struggles. Its source is the longstanding tradition of political activism within the communities that, as we mentioned at the outset, has been based on the ideal of collective self-determination.

In the 1920s and 1930s the CPA's opposition to a white Australia created an opening for Greek migrants to position themselves as Australians. By the mid 1930s self-identified Australians-of-Greek-origin were forming Greek workers leagues. With their organisations league activists socially instituted a new understanding of the connection between Greek ethnicity and Australianness and a corresponding

broadening of the meanings of organisation, work and struggle that operated within the community. The workers leagues engaged in political practices that repeatedly challenged the dominant foreigner discourses employed by Anglophone institutions and society on the one hand, and conservative Greek community forces on the other. As well as working alongside other Greek community organisations, league members established and strengthened ties with other migrant communities and with Anglophone progressive and democratic organisations beyond the CPA. These latter included responsive trade unions and prominent members of the Australian Labor Party.

The workers leagues' efforts constituted an on-going struggle to transform the Greek-Australian communities from insular, isolated entities into a political force capable of functioning as an integral part of Australian social and political life. By 1949 community awareness had been so transformed that the founders of the Confederation of Greek Organisations were taking for granted a notion of active Greek-Australian citizenship. From this position they outlined a political program that challenged the illegitimate conflation of Australian citizenship with British ethnicity. The 1949 conference marks the beginning of a twenty years struggle to translate the demand for the differentiation of ethnicity from citizenship into concrete political practice (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2002 b).⁴

From the mid 1950s onwards the idea of active Greek-Australian citizenship was implicitly functioning as an organisational principle that guided every area of Greek migrants' activism. This period saw the establishment of a progressively wide-reaching communication and organisational network. With the workers leagues and the newly formed newspaper, *Neos Kosmos*, at its centre, this network consisted of strong links that extended beyond the Greek-Australian communities to important parts of the Australian labour, left and reform movements.⁵

⁴ See also our article in this collection, "Ethnicity as an organisational concept in the life of the community".

⁵ See *Shaping A Collective Voice: Greek-Australian Activism From 1948-1958*, authors' book manuscript in progress.

From early in the 1960s Greek-Australian activists had at their disposal an extensive organisational and communication network. Its reach extended both inward towards the community in relation to which it played an educative role and outward towards other minorities and the Anglophone society in relation to which it played a spokesperson role. In its former capacity this network was to become indispensable to the absorption of newly arrived migrants into the established political culture of the Greek-Australian communities. This was a culture of defiance against the dominant assimilationist policies; of determination in the aspiration to become Australian without abandoning Greekness; and of conviction in the strength of collective resources. By the 1960s strong political campaigns promoted the idea that it was indeed possible and desirable for Greek migrants to become Australian without having to submit to any dominant culture or way of life. Greek-Australian activists were thus positioned to confront the impact of the dominant foreigner discourses on new arrivals and to advance their political struggles for collective self-determination. Large numbers of Greek migrants took part in industrial action, the unemployed and citizenship rights movements, the peace and anti-Vietnam war movements and so on. These campaigns were connected to wider political processes that aimed wherever possible to facilitate the transformation of a mass of people into a collective self-determining force. Their empowering nature set the tone for Greek migrants' future involvement in what were to become the migrant and ethnic rights movements of the 1970s and 1980s.⁶

Conclusion

The contribution and involvement of Greek-Australian activists in shaping the organisational life and institutional order of their communities is, undoubtedly, still a relatively underdeveloped area of Greek-Australian historiography. Yet, our research suggests that to address this omission would do more than merely add a further dimension to the

⁶ See *Becoming Australian: Greek Migrants' Struggles for Equal Rights and Social Justice in the post-1950s*, authors' book manuscript in progress.

existing historical record. More importantly perhaps, the writing of the history of Greek-Australian political activism serves to expose the twentieth-century historical processes through which the communities were positioned as the spaces inhabited by the perpetual foreigners-within.

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